

Calf Care from Birth to Weaning - *The first 8 weeks set the tone for a lifetime*

Healthy calves are the foundation of a healthy herd. How we manage the first few hours and weeks of a calf's life can impact not just survival, but future milk production, fertility, and overall resilience. The goal for heifer calves is to double their birth weight by 56 days of age, according to the Dairy Calf and Heifer Association Gold Standards. Additionally with the dramatic increase in market value of bull calves, it's an important investment to provide them with the same level of care as replacement heifer calves. Let's walk through the essentials.

First 24 Hours: The Golden Window

1. Calving Environment

- Keep maternity pens clean, dry, and well-bedded.
- Move cows before calving begins to minimize stress and contamination.

2. Immediate Post-Birth Protocols

- Ensure the calf is breathing. Gently clean mucus from nose and mouth and vigorously rub the calf's sides to stimulate breathing. Use a straw up the nose or water in the ear to stimulate if needed.
- Hanging calves over a gate is discouraged as their organs compress the lungs making it more difficult for them to breathe. Instead, our vets can teach you the calf recovery position.
- **Dip the navel** in 7% iodine tincture within 30 minutes.
- Dry the calf thoroughly, especially in cold weather. Use calf-jackets or heat lamps to help with thermoregulation.

3. Colostrum Management

- The single most important intervention. Bull calves deserve colostrum too.
- Aim for:
 - **Feed 2-4 L of high-quality colostrum (≥22% Brix)** within the first 2 hours and repeat within 8 hours, aiming for a minimum of 4L in the first 12 hours of life
 - Administer via bottle or esophageal feeder
 - If low quality, supplement with stored colostrum or a commercial replacer.
- Don't guess – test colostrum quality and clean all feeding equipment.
- Colostrum programs can be evaluated by testing calves' serum (blood) total protein. Your herd veterinarian can help you implement a passive immunity monitoring program.

Nutrition Basics: Building Blocks of Growth

Milk Feeding:

- 2–3 feeds/day of whole milk or milk replacer, target is to provide 10–15% of body weight
- Ensure that the milk replacer is mixed according to label instructions for powder quantity and water temperature.

Water

- Free-choice water starting from day of birth supports rumen development, encourages calf-starter intakes, and increases daily gains.
- Fresh warm water (100 F / 38 C) is important in all seasons but in cold months, it's important to refresh often as it cools down and can be a shock to the calf's rumen when consumed. In warm months if it's not refreshed frequently then it can grow bacteria and algae and be unpalatable.

Starter Grain

- Offer a palatable free-choice calf-starter by 3 days of age
- Keep it fresh and dry—calves are sensitive to mold or off smells.
- Remove leftovers **once a day** so that the starter will not accumulate on the bottom of the bucket and get compacted. Wet and compacted feed may prevent intakes
- To avoid waste, start by offering small handfuls, and increase over time to match appetite

Daily Observation = Early Intervention

Catching problems early helps keep health issues manageable. Here's what you can be looking for:

- **Bright eyes, upright ears, strong suckle reflex**
- **Manure consistency** (normal, loose, or watery)
- **Coughing, nasal discharge, or labored breathing**
- **Cleanliness of tail and navel**

Record-keeping helps: Track intake, attitude, weight gain, and treatments.

Vaccines, Scours, and Biosecurity

Common Calf Diseases:

- **Scours** (E. coli, rotavirus, coronavirus, cryptosporidia)
- **Pneumonia** (Pasteurella, Mycoplasma, viruses)

Prevention & Treatment Plans:

- Use dam vaccination programs to boost passive immunity.
- Implement calf-side vaccines (Inforce 3) or post-calving antibody supplementation (First Defense) in consultation with your herd veterinarian.
- Provide electrolyte therapy at first sign of scours or dehydration.
- Antibiotic treatment for cases of pneumonia should start promptly once identified and extend at least 3 days after they look better to avoid relapses as each incidence of pneumonia negatively affects their lifetime production.
- A clean environment can be your best defense against scours, so proper cleaning protocols for hutches and feeding equipment, moving hutches to a new area, or avoiding overstocking group housing can make a big impact

Housing: Comfort, Cleanliness, and Air

- Dry, draft-free, and well-ventilated spaces = healthier calves.
- Bedding should stay dry. The knee test involves you kneeling down on the bedding and if your coveralls get wet then bedding is inadequate

Weaning: The Gradual Goodbye

Criteria for Weaning:

- Consistently eating **2-3 lbs (or more) of starter grain** daily for at least 3 days
- Minimum age: **6-8 weeks**, but readiness matters more than age

Tips for Transition:

- Reduce milk gradually over 7-10 days
- Keep feed and water unchanged during this time
- Avoid additional stressors (vaccination, dehorning, moving pens) during this period.

Dr. John Thaler

Upcoming Holiday Hours

The clinic will be closed Monday May 19, 2025 for Victoria Day. As always, veterinarians will be available 24-7 for emergency service.